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From: Riley, Ellen
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Subject: Crain's Article on Spill and Public Relations

BP contained bad press along with oil in Lake Michigan spill

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By: Dave Bayless April 09, 2014



Oil spill response contractors clean up crude oil on a beach after a BP oil spill on Lake Michigan in Whiting, Ind., on March 25.

NEWSCOM

When it was learned that crude oil was leaking from its refinery into Lake Michigan last month, BP officials were no doubt fixated on containment. Containment of the actual spill was job one as workers and management assessed the scope of the leak, deployed resources and notified government agencies. Job 1A was containing the inevitable bad press and the hit on BP's corporate reputation that would result.

Granted, the oil that spilled from the Whiting, Ind., facility amounts to a thimble-full compared with the nearly 5 million barrels that poured from BP's Deepwater Horizon rig into the Gulf of Mexico over the course of three months in 2010.

But any spill of any magnitude — especially when it pollutes the main source of drinking water for millions of

people — demands a response. Environmental advocates, elected officials and the media are justified in calling for a full accounting of what went wrong.

BP's ham-handed management of the Deepwater Horizon disaster adds to an already crowded rogues gallery of corporations whose failure to demonstrate leadership in the face of adversity only made matters worse. But Deepwater Horizon also may have provided lessons for BP's local corporate officials on the front lines of this most recent crisis.

Credit BP for its forthright, assertive and timely response to the Whiting spill. When it learned of the spill, it notified the EPA and elected officials, including Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, in a timely manner. When press inquiries came in, it granted television cameras and photographers access to the spill site, enabling viewers to see firsthand the cleanup efforts underway.

Its media statements were measured, fact-based and seemingly devoid of the usual sanctimonious, saccharine language about the company's concern for the environment (let's be honest — the time to deliver that message is not when your crews and the EPA are skimming crude oil off the surface of Chicago's primary source of drinking water!).

And, when the news was breaking, BP offered up a spokesman to provide on-camera interviews, showing that officials were not hiding behind heavily lawyered media statements emailed to reporters.

MANAGING THE MESSAGE

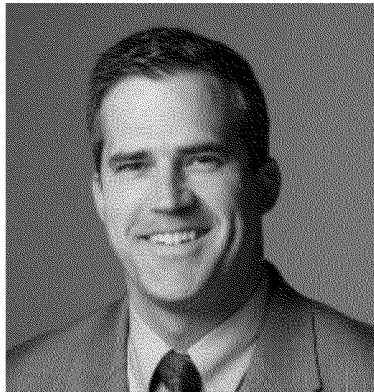
Communicating in the context of chaos always is difficult and seldom perfect. When BP had to backtrack on initial estimates regarding the size and scope of the spill, it did so by effectively explaining the difference between its initial, visual assessment and the more thorough assessment that followed. BP managed its message much like it contained the spill, preventing a bad situation from becoming much worse.

But winning the news cycle does not necessarily mean BP has “won the crisis.” How BP fares as it manages the next chapter in this crisis — its willingness to be held accountable and take proper corrective action — remains to be seen.

With the spill cleaned up and the story contained (at least for now), BP now must convince government officials and environmental advocates that its Whiting facility is safe. It also needs to demonstrate in clear and simple terms the steps it is taking to prevent future incidents before the refinery's safety record suffers another hit.

When the time comes to tell that story, the company should publicize it on its own terms instead of waiting for angry stakeholders to extract it from them during emotional public hearings, where clever, carefully crafted sound bites from government officials and advocates are sure to dominate ensuing media coverage.

At its core, effective crisis communications is a function of strong leadership. Corporate and government decision-makers always are better off managing the news instead of just letting “bad news happen to them.” Those who fail to lead and instead choose to dodge the tough questions, dismiss inquisitive reporters, deflect blame and point fingers do so at their own peril.



Dave Bayless is founder of Bayless Communications LLC, a Chicago-based consultancy that provides crisis communications and media relations counsel to municipalities, law enforcement agencies and private-sector clients.